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ABSTRACT

The BISVUX Project was designed to investigate the linguistic knowledge requirements of adults and to determine the best way of catering to those needs (especially the need to speak the language) in teaching and in studies. Because surveys of the perceived needs of participants in Swedish adult high school English courses, adult learning certificate programs, and study circles indicated that the ability to speak a foreign language is considered more important than any other aspect of language learning, the 79 experimental English language circles included in the BISVUX project focused on building oral communication skills. Included among the learning activities tested in the experimental circles were a variety of exercises centering on speech practice and oral tests given with the aid of interviews taken by a native teacher. Although the language circle participants became less afraid of speaking up than is usually the case in ordinary courses, some aspects of the predominantly oral approach did entail problems. Included among these were heavier demands on the self-discipline of students because of the increased amounts of homework necessary to replace class time traditionally spent on reading and writing and difficulties from the appreciable heterogeneity of the circles. (MN)

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Background and purpose

Several adult education surveys have shown that adult language students often fail to achieve the learning results desired and expected. There are, of course, many reasons for this. Many students have a poor knowledge of the implications of learning a language in adult life, with the result that they often have unrealistic aspirations. Another reason is the frequently unfavourable outward circumstances affecting adult studies. Finally, and not least, there is often a discrepancy between the kind of teaching the students want and the activities which their courses actually include. For example, a major survey of adult students of English revealed that when they started their course the participants mainly wanted practice in understanding and speaking English. At the end of the course, the same students stated that they had mainly practised understanding and reading the language.

The purpose of the BISVUX project has been, with this background in mind, to investigate the linguistic knowledge requirements of adults and to find out the best way of catering for those needs (especially the well-attested need to be able to speak the foreign language) in teaching and studies. An investigation of the attitudes of course participants to various types of study material and working procedure has also formed a natural part of the activities involved by the project, the main emphasis being on methods and materials for the development of oral communicative skills.

STUDIES OF NEEDS AND ATTITUDES

Municipal adult education

An early sub-study (Carlsson, 1981) included interviews with a group which had just completed an adult high school English

course in a two-year line of studies. A written questionnaire was administered too.

The same participants were interviewed again six months later concerning their general attitude to the instruction received and also to find out whether their views in this connection had changed with the wisdom of hindsight (perhaps in the light of new linguistic needs encountered after completing the course). A longer, tape-recorded interview was conducted with the teacher in charge of the course.

The results showed that the principal aim of the great majority was to learn to speak English better. The great majority also felt that it was more important to be able to speak fluently than to be able to speak perfectly, although nearly all the students felt that it was important for the teacher to explain points of grammar. Practically all the participants felt that they had had too little practice in using the spoken language.

The analysis of the interviews also showed among other things that there was an awkward contradiction where subsequent attitudes to the teaching were concerned. At the same time as the group was unanimous that it had too little practical training in the spoken language, the following classroom activities were rated "the most useful": 'The teacher testing us on our reading homework', 'The teacher explaining points of grammar', 'The teacher testing us on vocabulary', 'Fill-in stencils'. Items such as 'Role play', 'Describing pictures' and 'Free discussions in class' were rated far less "useful"! Thus although command of the spoken language was specified as the foremost objective, the purely oral exercises were not the most appreciated.

In another study of a similar kind, Korivux (municipal adult education) students were interviewed who had been awarded leaving certificates for their courses three years previously. The intention here was to find out what linguistic knowledge

requirements the interviewees had had since they left adult high school, and to investigate the extent to which these needs had been matched by what they learned on their courses. The interviewees were asked to suggest alterations to the arrangement of the courses and the teaching, and they were asked what had led them to begin studying the language in question.

As regards needs and use of the language after completion of the course, there was a difference between those who had taken an elementary school course and, on the other hand, those who had taken two and three-year upper secondary courses. Needs and the practical use of the language in the former group were primarily referable to situations of a tourist character, while the latter group particularly emphasized needs arising in connection with their jobs. Many of the interviewees stated that they had begun taking languages because they needed the knowledge or merits thus gained for something they intended doing afterwards. For various reasons, however, many of them had gradually changed their plans. Apparently the use which participants make of their knowledge is often quite different from what they originally intended.

We may also note that, although a relatively large proportion of the interviewees used the language in the course of their work, only a very few stated that they started studying because they felt that their jobs demanded a knowledge of languages.

Viewpoints concerning the teaching received earlier were predominantly positive, but negative viewpoints and suggested changes also emerged. The commonest point of criticism was insufficient opportunities of oral practice. It was also relatively common for teaching to be described as tied down to the textbook, traditional and quite static in design. The interviewees would have liked more conversation/speech practice, more activating practical language training (with particular emphasis on the element of activity), more utilization of the participants' experience and less "playing it by the book".

Older interviewees spoke more favourably of the courses than younger ones, and those who had only taken an elementary school course were more positive than those who had completed an upper secondary course.

Adult education associations

- / The perceived linguistic needs of participants in study circles have also been charted and analysed in a representative survey
- / population comprising 78 study circles and their leaders (Malmström, 1980).

In order to bring out the participants' linguistic needs as clearly as possible, the survey employed among other things concrete goal descriptions and concrete descriptions of typical learning activities to which the participants were asked to declare their standpoints. Questions were also asked concerning goals, teaching design etc.; these questions were addressed to participants and circle leaders alike.

- / The greatest importance was attached to the need to use the language as a tourist or temporary visitor in the country concerned. Next came more general social needs such as the ability to inform, to ask about and to discuss facts about oneself, the family, one's work and interests, one's own country and the foreign country, etc. Needs connected with the use of the language at work were judged less important than those mentioned above, although about half the respondents stated that they found the language useful to some extent in the course of their jobs.

The need to be able to understand the spoken language was described as very great, in fact almost as great as the need to be able to speak the language oneself. The circle leaders did not entirely share this opinion.

Another clear tendency was that the reproductive and fairly classroom-bound activities were a good deal more common than more productive types of exercise in which the participants practised more freely together.

Work using authentic materials such as realistic tape recordings, road signs, forms, information folders etc. is also an uncommon feature of circle studies. At the same time a great majority of circle participants have stated that they believe they will need to read and understand signs, notices, information folders and instructions for use, etc.

At an average meeting, more than half the time is spent reading, translating, working through a reading passage and going over points of grammar while only one-fifth is devoted to oral exercises in dialogue form. The time allotted to the individual participant for using the spoken language is very limited.

Both circle participants and circle leaders regard words and phrases as the most important "topic", and this is the sphere to which most time is devoted. Grammar is rated next in order of importance, but a comparison showed that grammar tends to receive overmuch attention in relation to the importance with which it is credited.

PRACTICAL EXPERIMENTS

As has already been made clear, it is the need to be able to speak the foreign language in concrete, everyday situations that bulks largest in adult education. A great deal of the work of this project has therefore been concerned with practical tests of various materials and methods for developing oral proficiency. Some of this experimentation has taken place within a number of experimental English, German and French courses at Östra Vuxengymnasiet, Gothenburg. While adhering to the provisions of the

NBE curricula, these courses have allowed more scope for the oral elements of teaching (Jönsson, 1980). Similar experiments have also taken place under the aegis of the adult education associations, i.e. in study circles (Malmström, 1981).

Experimental courses had been planned which focussed on the need to be able primarily to read the foreign language, but these had to be cancelled owing to lack of interest. The need to understand the printed language appears to be quite small compared to the need for oral proficiency.

The oral experimental courses in municipal adult education proved to cater for a definite need, as witness, for example, a rise in recruitment for the type of course exemplified in the BISVUX project. In the questionnaires administered at the beginning of the autumn and spring terms respectively, a large proportion of the participants stated that they had enrolled for the experimental courses specifically on account of their oral focus. Course evaluations also pointed to a predominantly positive attitude in the group towards practice materials and work. If anything the participants wanted still more spoken practice (and at the same time more written exercises).

Some groups took simple types of oral test, in some cases with the aid of interviews taken by a native teacher. The results were encouraging. For example, the pupils were found to become less afraid of speaking up than is usually the case on ordinary courses. Traditional tests which were administered did not indicate inferiority of achievement on the part of the experimental groups compared with other groups regarding, for example, written production, vocabulary and grammar.

Although the experience gained from the experimental courses was predominantly positive, some aspects of the predominantly oral approach entailed problems. Since more scope was given in the group to speech practice, a larger proportion of the traditional teaching items (set reading, written exercises etc.) had to

be given as homework, which in turn made heavier demands on the self-discipline of the individual. Another negative consequence which appeared was connected with the frequently appreciable heterogeneity of the groups. Thus work was impeded by cognitive inequalities, and individual weaknesses were more conspicuous in paired and group exercises (which are necessary working forms in orally oriented language courses). For example, there were cases of "weak" students being avoided when it came to choosing practice partners. Another apprehension which sometimes transpired from the participants was that of learning each other's mistakes if they spent too much time working together on oral paired and group exercises. But this risk is more than offset by the great value of abundant opportunities of practising the use of the language studied, as was confirmed by both teachers and participants in the experimental courses. Perhaps we should also point out that the experimental courses were not dominated by the oral paired and group exercises. It would be more accurate to say that these exercises were given rather more scope than is common in municipal adult education. Of course, a great deal of text reading, presentations by the teacher, written exercises etc. was also included.

The language circle experiments were aimed at practically testing, on the basis of the preceding needs survey (Malmström, 1980), a number of exercises which had been specially designed for the purpose and which were mainly concerned with oral communicative ability. Among other things the intention was to investigate to what extent circle participants felt that exercises with this focus and starting point catered for their needs, how such exercises were experienced in relation to other activities, how stimulating such exercises were found to be, and so on. A total of 79 English language circles, representing various types of community and various levels of knowledge, took part in the study.

Apart from the exercises (40 in all), use was made of a special commentary booklet containing a detailed description of the working procedures envisaged, and a set of questionnaires was

administered to both circle participants and circle leaders. The replies to the questionnaires showed that the types of exercise which were tried out were considered valuable in relation to the participants' professed needs of English. This was particularly the case with a small group of exercises dealing with facts about the participants' own everyday lives. It was also consistently apparent that less value was attached to the exercises primarily intended for the practice of patterns as such. Furthermore, there was an observable connection between the degree of openness in the exercises - i.e. the amount of scope which they afforded for the participants' own words and phrases - and their assessed value. Exercises focussing on tourist requirements were valued in proportion to their open-endedness, while something of a contrary tendency could be observed regarding general social exercises. From this one can draw the preliminary conclusion that the participants consider their general social needs to be confined mainly to certain parts or functions of a conversation. The types of exercise reflecting prolonged conversations or more comprehensive statements are not considered equally relevant to these needs. As regards the absolute evaluation of the exercises, we were also able to note that certain less conventional types of exercise, which among other things can be said to come very close to authentic usage, were appreciated very highly.

The experience of an exercise was not prejudiced by its being found difficult, contrary to what one might have expected. In fact there was an observable positive connection between the tasks which were considered difficult and those which in both absolute and relative terms were considered most valuable. This is probably quite simply because the participants were less accustomed to working with the types of exercise they considered most valuable, e.g. conversation exercises which are meant to reflect a realistic linguistic situation and to give the participants an opportunity of putting things in their own words. Besides, exercises of this kind are naturally quite difficult by their very nature, even if their actual conduct does not necessarily involve any great problems.

The full results of this part of the project are presented in Malmström (1981).

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